

**“Exchanging voices, questioning voices ...:
Dissent and Dialogue in the Poetry of Early Victorian Women”**

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The purpose of this paper is to examine the extent to which early Victorian women poets (1820-1850) have communicated through their poetry their feelings of dissent in relation both to patriarchal conventions and the masculine poetic tradition. By creating their own myths and by adopting the multivocal forms of the dialogue with the other, the dramatic monologue and the soliloquy, these female poets have managed to question traditional concepts without directly exposing themselves. For reasons of time and space, we will concentrate our analysis specifically in the poetry of Emily and Anne Brontë, with only occasional references to other contemporary authors.

It was perhaps in the Brontës' private world of Gondal, a mixture of history, literature and imagination, that the idea of the self as a godlike, creative force was born. And it was in that imaginary land that Emily and Anne created an epic that launched an extended dialogue between themselves, their gods and the rest of the world. Emily's muse is not the silent reflection of herself that Shelley's and Wordsworth's is, but a vocal presence that forces her into dialogue with both the masculine poetic tradition and herself. Anne engages Cowper's and the church's sentiments and teachings with her own voice, at the same time that she disputes her sister Emily's unorthodoxy. The sisters use Romantic, elegiac and devotional devices to engender their dialogues as a strategic re-appropriation of traditionally masculine formulae; these are reformed by multiple discourses that question, challenge and reshape patriarchal conventions.

Both Emily's and Anne's personal and Gondal poems suggest that each sister sustained a complex dialogical relationship with their religious and social upbringing, each other and their personal creativity. It is through both externalised and internal dialogue that they engage and battle the dissenting voices and constant constraints put upon them.

In spite of a poetic tradition that begins with the early Greeks and, more significantly for women poets, with Sappho, it is now generally believed that important forms such as the dramatic monologue emerged in the early nineteenth century and primarily in reaction to Romantic lyricism and Romantic theories of poetry.¹ This gradual and generalised emphasis on a more hybrid and indirect form of poetic expression begins, thus, as a poetry of unequivocal contestation: by placing the speaking self in context, poets begin to expose the illusory nature of the autonomous

¹ For example, Alan Sinfield (*Dramatic Monologue*, 1977) links Victorian dramatic monologues with such complaints as Theocritus's complaint of Polyphemus (third century BC) and the dramatic epistles from Ovid's *Heroides* (c. first century BC). The dramatic monologue is also generally accepted as the primary form through which Victorian poets began to negotiate both voice and aesthetic. According to Robert Langbaum, it became an appropriate form for an empiricist and relativist age wanting to explore a variety of positions (1957: 107-8). J. Hillis Miller attributes the emergence of the form to the loss of absolute values, a means of trying out a range of beliefs (1963: 107).

and unified Romantic subject. They dramatise it precisely in order to examine it, and in place of the autonomous self they propose and explore a more complex, fragmented and contextualised representation of the subject. (Byron, 2003: 3)²

Critics have also begun to suggest that the work of some late Romantic and early Victorian women poets might have been pioneer in this respect.³ The suggestion that it might instead have been women poets writing during the transitional period of the 1820s, rather than middle-century male poets, who invented the monologue or other polemic forms is certainly a tempting one, especially if one considers the fact that many of those female authors inscribed themselves in the lyrical tradition of the ‘abandoned’ and suicidal Greek poetess.⁴

Felicia Hemans – a Romantic poet who posthumously became the most popular woman poet of the Victorian period⁵ – explicitly connects Sappho’s plight to her femininity. The connection between male desertion and female creativity remains traumatically deep-rooted in her imagination. Hemans’s “The Last Song of Sappho” (1834) takes as its starting point a sketch by Richard Westmacott Jr. that depicts Sappho “penetrated with the feeling of utter abandonment.” With this image in mind, Hemans articulates Sappho’s own voice in the moment before the poet took her life. The “living strings” of her lyre are “quench’d” since “broken even as they, / The heart whose music made them sweet, / Hath pour’d on desert-sands its wealth away” (ll. 10-11). Though

² In her study of this typically Victorian form or genre, Glennis Byron claims that “Victorian literature generally moves away from an emphasis on the autonomous individual and begins to represent the self in context, focusing upon the individual in relation to others and upon the individual’s position in society.” (pp. 3-4).

³ The dramatic monologue is usually considered to be developed simultaneously but independently by Alfred Tennyson (1809-92) and Robert Browning (1812-89) in the 1830’s. Tennyson read his “Saint Simeon Stylites” to a group of friends in 1833 and Browning was the first to publish, in 1836, “Porphyria’s Lover” and “Johannes Agricola in Meditation”. On the other hand, both Felicia Hemans (1793-1835) and Letitia Landon (1802-1838) had already experimented with the same or a similar form, as the collections *Records of Woman* (1828), *Songs of the Affections* (1830) and *The Improvisatrice* (1824), *A History of the Lyre* (1829) may respectively attest.

⁴ Sappho is a figure whose death provides a source of inspiration and despair for women writers throughout the nineteenth century. Both the putative life and the fragmentary works of this sixth-century BC Greek writer – the most prominent woman of the classical poets and the acknowledged head of the lyric tradition – powerfully inflect countless representations of the Victorian poetess as an abandoned woman. Sappho’s suicidal leap from the Leucadian cliff after her male lover Phaon abandoned her became an allegory for women poets’ dilemmas and an alibi for their voices. See Lawrence Lipking’s *Abandoned Women and Poetic Tradition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

⁵ Chronologically, Hemans is a Romantic poet but, since much of her writing belongs to the post-Romantic twilight of the 1820s and 30s, she represents an early transition into the characteristic preoccupations of Victorian verse. For critics such as Angela Leighton, it is as a ‘Victorian’ – one of the first – that her influence and significance in literary history is most profound.

expressly locating the futility of such vocation, this Sapphic moment becomes for Hemans and many other women a prime vehicle for poetic utterance. Sappho's leap is also a bid for self-expression, physical passion and poetic power:

I, with this winged nature fraught,
These visions wildly free,
This boundless love, this fiery thought –
Alone I come – oh! give me peace, dark sea!
(ll. 37-40)

But women poets could speak in the voice of many others: Corinne, Eulalie, Properzia Rossi, Caterina, Beatrice, Laura (to name but a few). The voice of the poetess for them took the form of a self-consciously feminine self-staging in verse that appropriated many bodies, lives and identities. According to Susan Brown,

This voice represented a fertile space between the expression of self and the representation of others, between the spontaneous Romantic outpouring that becomes gendered as female gush and a distanced dramatic voice that developed over the course of the century into the dramatic monologue. (Brown, 2000: 184)

The frequent excision of the 'I' signals one of Hemans's most obvious differences from her Romantic contemporaries. Although full of echoes of Wordsworth, Byron and Scott, her verse achieves its originality "in the persistent and ostentatious gendering of its voice." (Leighton, 1992: 21)⁶

The dramatic monologue would thus seem to be a useful form for a woman poet to develop. To begin with, there was the traditional gendering of the speaking poetic subject as male and the object as female; the monologue offered one means by which women could assume the position of the authoritative speaking subject. Secondly, with the growing separation of private and public spheres and the association of women writers with the personal and confessional, the assumption of a mask or persona might then be a strategy for self-protection: "speaking in the voice of a dramatised 'I' is a way

⁶ In "The Chamois Hunter's Love", for example, Hemans takes a typically Romantic setting (Alps and solitary male hunter) to present the different views of both woman lover and woman poet. Leighton claims that Felicia Hemans is the first woman poet to embrace wholeheartedly the woman artist as a subject for poetry (1992: 33). The monologue "Properzia Rossi" (1828) represents Hemans's most ambitious version of the Sappho-Corinne myth and it opens with a full-blooded cry for feeling and creative power on the part of the celebrated female sculptor of Bologna.

of insisting that the voice is not to be identified with her own, that her work *is* art, not simply an outpouring of personal feeling.” (Byron, 2003: 47)⁷

Another strain of the poetess, Letitia Elizabeth Landon (known as L.E.L.) presents a complex layering of voices framed by that of her Florentine *improvisatrice* or poet-performer.⁸ Even though she has “poured [her] full and burning heart / In song” (ll. 1-2), she, like Hemans, provides lyric utterances that are responses to artistic objects rather than effusions of the heart. A series of descriptions of her paintings preface her songs, which are divided from her own utterances and given their own titles. One of them, “Sappho’s Song” (, does not seem to offer a connection between Landon and the one “Who proved what woman’s hand might do, / When, true to the heart pulse, it woke / The harp” (l. 3). As Susan Brown points out, “The asymmetrical framing jars, as if the layers of voices bearing a teasingly analogous but always artfully divorced relationship to one another might be extended indefinitely.” (2000: 185). Modern readers are, thus, apt to find an ambiguous meditation on the relationship between the self, the other and the lyric voice.

L.E.L. seems to have taken more risks than Hemans as she adapted Byronic poetics to her own purposes. In L.E.L.’s “History of the Lyre” (1829), Eulalie, a new *improvisatrice* or poetic performer, reveals that her poetic utterances proceed not from the experience and loss associated with Sappho but from genius and imagination:

‘I have sung passionate songs of beating hearts;
Perhaps it had been better they had drawn
Their inspiration from an inward source.
Had I known even an unhappy love,
It would have flung an interest round life
Mine never knew. This is an empty wish;
Our feelings are not fires to light at will
Our nature’s fine and subtle mysteries;
We may control them, but may not create,
And Love less than its fellows. I have fed
Perhaps too much upon the lotos fruits
Imagination yields, – fruits which unfit
The palate for the more substantial food
Of our own land – reality.’
(ll. 333-346)

⁷ Glennis Byron also states that “In creating speakers for her monologues, Hemans achieves such distance by crossing boundaries of time and space, race and class.” (2003: 47). In her work, Byron considers precisely the way women poets use the monologue to critique conventional assumptions concerning the feminine and also the innovative ways in which they manipulate the form.

⁸ Landon was “voted one” with Sappho when she published her poetic volume *The Improvisatrice* in 1824. It was considered the *Childe Harold* for women, just as her personal and professional life, surrounded by successive scandals, came to resemble the Byronic biography.

In the long monologue reproduced by a male speaker (her English admirer and deserter), a technique which points forward to the devices of self-distance and doubt employed by later poets, Eulalie laments the ill effects of fame, thus anticipating Landon's own tragic fate. Angela Leighton suggests that it is not only the voice of the monologue which is divided, between woman and onlooker, female and male, but the self is divided as well: "As a result, the old improvising monologue gives way to a more dramatic form, in which the self is not unitary and perpetually self-justifying, but unsure, unlike its self, possibly untrue to itself." (1992: 67).

In referring to the inherent dramatic nature of Victorian poetry, Isobel Armstrong declares that "To re-order lyric expression as drama is to give it a new content and to introduce the possibility of interrogation and critique" (Armstrong, 1993: 12). What she classifies as the "double poem" explores the unstable entities of self and the world and the problems of interpretation and representation through debate and contest (13-14). She is aware that the dialogue created through this linguistic struggle (Volosinov) might lead to a 'dialogic' poetry in Bakhtin's terms. Although neither believed that poetry could generate dialogical structures or that poetic texts could participate in struggle, for Armstrong manifestly "the Victorian double poem generates the drama of contending principles." (493, n. 34). It would, therefore, be an easy task to find examples that openly contradict that initial denial.⁹

In her chapter "A Music of Thine Own", Armstrong stresses that "The doubleness of women's poetry

comes from its ostensible adoption of an affective mode, often simple, often pious, often conventional. But those conventions are subjected to investigation, questioned, or used for unexpected purposes. The simpler the surface of the poem, the more likely it is that a second and more difficult poem will exist beneath it. (1993: 324)

She listens to this 'music' through the dissonances women's poetry created by turning the affective conventions and feelings associated with a feminine modality of experience problematic, especially when they worked within those same conventions

⁹ In *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (1981), Mikhail Bakhtin famously denied poetry the dialogic form on the ground that it was irreducibly monologic, the product of a single, unified and non-conflictual poetic voice. See also V. N. Volosinov, in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1986). Armstrong prefers the model of linguistic struggle to dialogism because it seems particularly appropriate to poetic forms, where the complexity of language is foregrounded.

(323). She argues that “It was this assimilation of an aesthetic of the feminine which enabled the woman poet to revolutionise it from within, by using it to explore the way a female subject comes into being.” (324)

One of the aspects that Armstrong singles out is the insistence on speaking in another woman’s voice, which she sees as a disguise or protection against self-exposure. The frequent adoption of a dramatised voice by precursors such as Hemans and Landon was continued throughout the century by women poets such as Charlotte and Emily Brontë, Augusta Webster and Amy Levy.¹⁰ It is when she refers in particular to “The Poetics of Expression” that Armstrong notices how resourcefully the three Brontës follow Mrs Hemans “in exploring consciousness under duress, imprisoned within limit” (332). She believes that they are capable of producing poems with an apparently simple moral or emotional surface but which in reality pose more complex questions; this is what she designates as “the poem of the affective moment, in its relation to moral convention and religious and cultural constraint.”(333)¹¹

It was, to begin with, in the make believe world of Gondal that both Emily and Anne Brontë were able to confront and confound the restraints put on them by the authorities and whims of the outside world.¹² This very incipient epic was responsible for launching an extended dialogue between themselves, their gods and the rest of the world. The fact that both sisters use Romantic, elegiac and devotional devices to engender their dialogues should not be simplified or viewed as a source of disempowerment, feeble attempts at imitation. They should, instead, be perceived as a strategic re-appropriation of traditionally masculine formulae that are reformed by

¹⁰ Armstrong suggests that such a mask was peculiarly necessary for women writers: “The adoption of the mask appears to involve a displacement of feminine subjectivity, almost a travesty of femininity, in order it can be made an object of investigation.” (325) She refers the example of Charlotte Brontë, who conceived a monologue by the wife of Pontius Pilate in one of her earliest known poems.

¹¹ Armstrong analyses in some detail a poem by each of the sisters: “The Arbour” by Anne Brontë, “The Lonely Lady” by Charlotte Brontë and “Enough of Thought, Philosopher” by Emily Brontë.

¹² The earliest known reference to Gondal occurs in a record paper of 24 November 1834: the first of a series of records that Emily and Anne wrote at approximately four-year intervals. But the idea of an island kingdom goes back to December 1827, when each child chose an island as part of an imaginative exercise that developed into ‘The Islanders’ Play’. The two most important items are ‘GONDAL, a large island in the North Pacific’ and ‘GAALDINE, a large island newly discovered in the South Pacific’. Its tropical climate is contrasted with the more bracing weather of Gondal, and Gaaldine may have stood in relation to Gondal rather as England to Scott’s Scotland. The background of the stories, poems and plays derived from a romantically perceived Scotland of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, where noble persons contend for honour, power or love in a series of intrigues about the throne, conspiracies, revenges, assassinations, sieges and battles. This saga continued to be part of Emily’s and Anne’s lives for another twelve years. The prose that was written has been lost and most of the surviving poems are lyrical or meditative, with only a few narratives.

multiple discourses that question, challenge and reshape patriarchal conventions. “A reinscription of phallocentrism”, Patricia Yeager says, “may not be seen as a sign of weakness or plagiarism, but of a woman’s own ability to signify, that is, her ability to play with, to control, and to restructure patriarchal traditions”. (1989: 959)

As Nina Auerbach points out, Emily never collapses into the “self-luxuriance of Byronism, nor seeks the insurance of a stagnant, calm eternity of nature as does Wordsworth”. (1985: 54) Rather, as she notes, Gondal is a stormy, tempestuous place with changing seasons and political climates (54). Nor is Emily’s muse the silent reflection of herself that Shelley’s and Wordsworth’s is, but a vocal presence that forces her into dialogue with both the masculine poetic tradition and herself as a socially gendered matrix of power. Likewise, Anne is not simply a formulaic Victorian moralist and devotional poet, nor an imitator of her favourite poet, Cowper: Rather, she engages Cowper’s and the church’s sentiments and teachings with her own voice, as she disputes her sister Emily’s unorthodoxy and struggles to relieve herself of the guilt and uncertainty associated with feminine creativity amid conventional social and religious power structures.

While Bakhtin’s theories discuss a variety of dichotomised tensions between political, social and philosophical factions, he does not mention gender as a category to which his ideas of struggle apply.¹³ However, in more recent years, these ideas have been extended to feminist criticism by such representatives as Dale Bauer, Diane Herndle and Mary Russo, amongst others. A feminist dialogic will primarily “concern itself with points of view, with the interlocative dialogical self, investigating both its own positions and those of others”. (Hohne, 1994: xiii)¹⁴ At the same time, it will include the idea of “a female chronotope” that would consist of “positing the female subject in the context of space and time ... and emphasiz[ing] the relationships between race, class and gender” (xiii-xv). Ultimately, a feminist dialogic should answer the question: How can one find one’s voice through confrontation and exchange without silencing the other?

¹³ See Wayne C. Booth’s article “Freedom of Interpretation: Bakhtin and the Challenge of Feminist Criticism” of 1982.

¹⁴ The work of Karen Hohne and Helen Wussow is called *A Dialogue of Voices: Feminist Literary Theory and Bakhtin*.

The interconnected voices of the two poets Emily and Anne Brontë may provide the answer: It is only through sustained and continual dialogue that the multiplicity of voices can be heard, from both outside and within the self. Both their personal and Gondal poems suggest that each sister sustained a complex dialogical relationship with their religious and social upbringing, each other, and their own personal creativity. It is through both externalised and internal dialogue that they engage and battle the dissenting voices and constant constraints put upon them as they force dialogical recognition of the silenced and marginalised “other”.

Bakhtin’s ideas concerning the hidden dialogicity in Dostoevsky’s texts accurately describe the relationship of Emily Brontë to her Gondal poems as she explores subject/object relationships through language and poetic expression.¹⁵ The problem of poetic identity and subjectivity becomes increasingly important under patriarchy and brings to mind the important question asked by Toril Moi concerning the woman writer: If the author is defined as male, as she finds herself already defined by him, how can she venture to take the pen at all?¹⁶ The inclusivity of dialogism seems to offer her the chance to circumvent and challenge the cultural silence imposed upon women.

The randomly ordered poems containing the cacophony of voices that comprise Gondal contain divergent, sometimes opposing, voices within the author and in answer to the dissenting voices without as well as within. Accordingly, the speaking “I” of the poem may even address a third party (the poet herself may sometimes act as this party) or enter into a dialogue with another poet, her sister Anne, who also participated in Gondal. Thus, within the Gondal saga, dialogue is both intertextual and intratextual, arising from the characters’ and author’s conversations with the “unspoken words of another person”.

Interestingly, Emily is able to translate her surroundings and herself into a Gondalian context, as well as to blur the lines of distinction between her physical and

¹⁵ “Imagine a dialogue of two persons in which the statements of the second speaker are omitted, but in such a way that the general sense is not at all violated. The second speaker is present invisibly, his words are not there, but deep traces left by these words have a determining influence on all the present and visible words of the first speaker. We sense that this is a conversation, although only one person is speaking, and it is a conversation of the most intense kind, for each present, uttered word responds and reacts with its every fiber to the invisible speaker, points to something outside itself, beyond its own limits, to the unspoken words of another person.” *Problems in Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p. 117.

¹⁶ Toril Moi, *Sexual/textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* [1985], London and New York: Routledge, 2001.

imaginative existence. In her essay on Gondal, Teddi Chichester notes the importance of Emily's complete identification with her poetic creations, what Margaret Homans calls her "mobile adoption of fictive roles".¹⁷ The many masks, voices and selves of Emily Brontë are expressed through the multiplicity of voices in Gondalian society. Within the poems there is a preoccupation not only with death,¹⁸ but with what Chichester calls "feminine multiplicity" or the refusal to become "fixed, immobilized" (1991: 3). She views Emily's poetic strategy as one that will allow her to "elude or bravely embrace death by trying on different selves, different genders, different philosophies" (2).

Much of Emily's personal poetry, however, dwells not on eluding death, but the wish to remove herself from the non-Gondalian world of folly and falsity that troubled her. Conversely, other personal poems, such as "Plead for Me" and "The Night-Wind" depict the author's anxiety and need to justify this alternate existence. In Brontë's personal poetry, particularly in "Plead for Me", we see her oscillating between viewing herself and crediting her muse or "god" of Imagination as being the matrix of her poetic power. Her contradictory impulses between both the desire for and scorn of poetic and personal recognition are illustrated by her anger at her sister's discovery of her poems and her initial refusal to allow their publication and her subsequent acquiescence to publish under a pseudonym, an "alternate" voice and persona, Ellis Bell. Emily became enraged by Charlotte and Anne's revelation that the voice of Ellis Bell was that of Emily Brontë, again illustrating the extreme identification that Brontë had with her created voices and yet distance she felt necessary to maintain between creation and creator.

This duality may have engendered an internal conflict that allows us to view the Gondal saga not as a series of loosely related poems, but as utterances in an inner dialogue between the insistent female voice and the dissenting, authoritative voice of the perceived non-Gondal world. As Bakhtin tells us, language bequeaths to us several voices, and these voices construct both selves and characters-as-selves (1984: 4). Emily's identification with her heroine, Augusta (A.G.A.), as well as other Gondalian voices, enables her to challenge the dissenting voices of the non-Gondalian patriarchal world that dictate and limit her creative and personal expression and whose Gondalian

¹⁷ Teddi Chichester, "Evading 'Earth's Dungeon Tomb': Emily Brontë, A.G.A. and the Fatally Feminine". Margaret Homans, "Emily Brontë", *Women Writers and Poetic Identity*, p. 109.

¹⁸ Many critics believe that this preoccupation stems from Emily's personal loss of her mother and sisters.

representatives are addressed from a distance after abandonment or death. These dialogised monologues become what Bakhtin calls “micro-dialogues” in which every word is double-voiced and contains within it a conflict of voices (61). The voice of A.G.A. expresses the guilt, shame and remorse in her defiance that the woman-as-author must also experience when doing battle with the dominant patriarchy that attempts to restrict and shape her utterances.

Emily’s choice of a woman to rule Gondal stands in stark contrast to male-ruled and dominated land of Angria, where Branwell’s and Charlotte’s characters dwelled.¹⁹ The name of Gondal’s capital city, Regina, further illustrates female dominance and the secondary role of the male characters. Brontë’s, as well as Augusta’s, proclaimed preference and identification with such traditionally feminine elements as the earth, the night, the moon and stars in much of her poetry contrasts with the more fundamentally male elements of fire, sunlight, rulership and action that also come to be associated with the Queen of Gondal and depicts the chasm and disruption felt between the feminine and masculine principles of the inner and outer worlds. The dominant voice of Augusta seemingly silences all “other” competing separative voices and gives rise to a multitude of dissenting utterances.

True to her carnivalesque nature, the future queen of Gondal is born during a raging storm, under the “aegis of perpetual flashes of change.”²⁰ Augusta’s essential nature is disruptive, and she is certainly disruptive to the hierarchy of Gondal as she ascends to the throne. Augusta gains strength through movement, through change, and with each death and act of nature, while men, static and often imprisoned in tombs and prison cells, are overpowered by her movement and progression. Even from the grave, however, the voices of these men “haunt” Augusta, as conscience awakens dialogic conflict.

The first casualty of Augusta’s need for vocative control is her first husband, Alexander, Lord of Ælbe, whom she abandons for Lord Alfred, and who dies thereafter,

¹⁹ Charlotte and Branwell describe the founding in Africa of this imaginary colony. From the beginning of their collaboration the Duke of Wellington, hero of the recent wars against Napoleon, played a major part. Gradually, Charles Wellesley and the Marquis of Douro, his two sons, gain prominence.

²⁰ Like Augusta and Gondal itself, the carnival attitude demands that the world is, or should be, “open and free, everything still in the future and always in the future and always requiring rebirth” (Bakhtin, 1984: 139).

possibly in banishment.²¹ At his gravesite, years later, Augusta speaks to him, attempting to explain herself not only to him, but perhaps to those who would accuse her of lacking in sentimentality, since her actions belie her words of remorse.²² Such self-consciousness in itself dialogises Augusta's speech, which is directed toward herself, her object, and any listening third party (the reader). Therefore, she must vocalise her motives:

But thou art now on a desolate sea –
Parted from Gondal and parted from me –
All my repining is hopeless and vain,
Death never yields back his victims again.
(“A.G.A. to A.E.” ll. 16-20)

The tone and rhythm of the poem are conversational and the last lines seem to answer any reproach not only to Alexander, but also to any observer who would condemn Augusta for refusing to stay herself in mourning. Chichester notes the seemingly sinister element in the poem and views it as the result of the inability to view women traditionally as the speaking subjects in an elegy and, thereby, as “a reversal of the masculine/feminine dynamic” (1991: 6). Alexander indeed lies lifeless and seemingly voiceless and, therefore, powerless; however, his silence is enough to provoke a response from Augusta.²³

Augusta is again called upon to perform an elegy for her second husband, Lord Alfred, who dies of a broken heart after she deserts him for the Emperor Julius Brenzaida.²⁴ The seeming unending succession of elegies is interesting because with each death, Augusta's social position, future and even safety is uncertain. The tradition of the elegy itself is undermined, as it is not the traditional female body that is absent in these elegies, but the male symbol of hierarchy, control and power that has alternately protected and imprisoned her. However, each death also renews dialogue and, again, Augusta feels compelled to answer the voice of conscience and propriety, but cannot

²¹ Augusta's love for Alexander, Lord of Elbë, ended with his violent death by Lake Elnor, perhaps after a battle (as the poems “O Day, He cannot die”, “There shines the moon, at noon of night” and “Lord of Ælbe, on Ælbe hill” testify).

²² Confessional and self-justifying speech must anticipate and be directed towards another. Silence, however, would leave Augusta's actions, as well as the silence itself, to be inaccurately interpreted.

²³ A. G. A., who speaks the poem, is standing in the heather on Elbë hill, from which she can see the lights of Ælbe Hall among the woods below.

²⁴ As for Alfred Sidonia of Aspin Castle, she ‘wronged both him and heaven’; after a joyous affair, she left him in remorse, after which he ‘failed’ and died (as five different poems seem to testify).

feel remorse for her actions. Her elegy to Alfred, “Holy be thy resting place”, is striking because she seems to remove herself from the care and consignment of his memory by wishing for him heavenly “dreams” rather than immortality:

And will not guardian angels send
Kind dreams and the thoughts of love
Though I no more may watchful bend
Thy repose above?

And will not heaven itself bestow
A beam of glory there
That summer’s grass more green may grow
And summer’s flowers more fair?
(ll. 5-12)

Alfred is essentially reduced to fodder, as the grass and flowers that grow upon him will be grazed upon, and since his grave is seemingly unmarked, no voice will be heard but eternal nature’s.²⁵ The ennui and the perfunctory tone in her final parting from him, together with the word “farewell”, suggest some formality.²⁶ The double negative stresses the fact that not only will he “not remain” physically, but that she wishes his spirit and memory soon to be far removed from her. It is perhaps the final recognition that Mother Nature will ensure some sort of continuity that prevents Augusta from joining the cult of mourning or performing a traditional elegy.²⁷

Farewell, farewell ‘tis hard to part
Yet loved one it must be
I would not rend another heart
Not even by blessing thee

Go we must break affection’s chain
Forget the hopes of years
Nay not wilt thou remain
To waken wilder tears

This herald breeze with thee and me

²⁵ Augusta’s elegy to Alfred is immediately striking in its lack of knowledge or concern as to the placement of the gravesite: “Yes holy be thy resting place /Wherever thou may’st lie” (1-2). Additionally, the silent, watchful, heavenly angel of the hierarchical and patriarchal heaven will seemingly relieve her of the wifely duty of watching over his child-like repose.

²⁶ Augusta’s failure to address Alfred as anything more than “loved one” reinforces this formality. The lack of punctuation likewise contributes to a want of emphasis or intonation, suggesting a hurried tone with little emotion.

²⁷ Elisabeth Bronfen, *Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (1992), notes that the act of elegy precedes the act of removal, in accordance with the Christian notion of severance separating the dead from the living with finality. Here, Augusta cannot break the essential unity between life and death – the dead will still be heard through Mother Nature for eternity. Nor is there any clear marker, no gravestone, to signify division between the living and the dead.

Roved in the dawning day
And thou shouldest be where it shall be
Ere evening far away
(ll. 13-24)

Although Alfred's memory "should" be far away, as Augusta expects, his memory, as well as Alexander's, not only haunts her, but forces her into authorship and into dialogue with an unknown other, probably her creator, Emily. And it is Emily, in Gondalian disguise, who questions her queen's melancholy. In "To A.G.A.", the voice of the poet, in an attempt to probe not only her creation's motives but her own psyche, questions Augusta's sombre mood, which contrasts with the surrounding setting of singing breezes and gleaming leaves. The poet's voice familiarly questions Augusta as to the whereabouts of her lover and suggests either absence or infidelity as the cause of her unhappy state of mind. The dialogue is designed to force an admission that would normally not be expressed by Augusta. She answers that her lover is not absent and that he is "faithful as the grave", equating the reciprocal constancy that is expected from her with stagnation and death. To Brontë's insistence that her creation "Reply this once" as to whether she has been faithful herself, Augusta replies indirectly, yet clearly:

I gazed upon the cloudless moon
And loved her all the night
Till morning came and ardent moon
Then I forgot her light. –

No, -- not forgot, eternally
Remains its memory dear
But could the day seem dark to me
Because the night was fair?
(ll. 26-33)

The conflict between the moon and sun and night and day is predominant in both Emily's Gondal and personal poetry, and critics such as Homans and Tayler think that it depicts the struggle to choose between the inner, feminine realm of poetic inspiration and the outer, patriarchal world of expression and action.²⁸ Through Augusta, Emily expresses and questions her own dilemma, as she feels forced to choose between poetic inspiration and poetic expression. The choice is translated into Augusta's choice between the calm, doting, isolated Lord Alfred, and the ambitious, conquering, sun-like Julius Brenzaida. Although the situation inspires a potential debate, the dialogue ends

²⁸ Margaret Homans, *Women Writers and Poetic Identity* (104-29). Irene Tayler, *Holy Ghosts. The Male Muses of Emily and Charlotte Brontë* (18-71).

abruptly as Brontë does not dispute her creation's choice, willing to allow her to explore an option while she watches silently and safely from afar:

‘I may well mourn that only one
Can light my future sky
Even though by such a radiant sun
My moon of life must die’ –
(ll. 34-37)

Unlike her sister Anne's poetic dialogues, Emily does not dispute or advise the polyphonic voices of her creations; rather, she allows herself to experience the otherness of the text and of her own mind by allowing the competing voices to flourish without restricting or subverting them.

Augusta's desertion of Lord Alfred allows her to marry the Emperor Julius Brenzaida and finally become the queen of Gondal and to perform yet another elegy upon his demise. Julius is one of the few celebrated males in Gondal, yet he, too, must die to allow Augusta sole rulership of Gondal and to allow her voice to remain dominant. Fifteen years after Julius dies in battle, Augusta returns to his gravestone, apologetic for her ability to exist and even flourish without him, in "Remembrance". The predominant focus of the poem is not Augusta's despair, but her self-justification.²⁹ Within her speech, the personal pronoun "I" and its forms appear twelve times, indicating a preoccupation with the self rather than with the one in the grave.³⁰ Augusta's plea to Julius, "Sweet love of youth forgive me, if I forget thee, / While the world's tide is bearing me along" (ll.13-14), is quickly replaced by the necessity of such forgetfulness if she is to flourish in the world, as she learns "how existence could be cherished / Strengthened and fed without the aid of joy" (ll. 23-24). The intended apology engenders a dialogic clash between the desire, even obligation, to resist time and the present and, on the other hand, the desire for movement and to experience future possibilities.³¹

²⁹ In spite of this emphasis, C. Day-Lewis notes the dragging rhythm and meter of the poem. He calls it the longest meter in English poetry, imitating the slow, dragging sound of a funeral procession (1957: 83).

³⁰ The second person "thee" and its forms appear only six times. Besides, most references to Julius appear in the first four stanzas, while the last four show a shift to the first person, as she learns to "check useless tears of passion" (l. 25).

³¹ Irene Tayler notes that although the meter is dirge-like, the poem gathers speed through alliteration and internal rhyme, and that the language becomes almost orgasmic in such phrases as "rapturous pain" (1990: 30).

In Emily's personal poetry, the presence of dialogue derives either from an introspective projection of the self, in which the poet literally speaks to or argues with herself, or from an imaginative exchange with an element of nature, such as the heath, the wind or the stars. "In "Loud without the wind was roaring" (1838), for example, it is the dislocated "brown heath" ("scattered and stunted", "half-blighted"), that the speaker of the poem casually spots, that seems to address Emily in her exile from home, thus symbolically establishing a powerful correlation between the confined status of the two: " 'The grim walls enfold me / I have bloomed in my last summer's sun'" (ll. 57-8) . Also in "The night wind" (1840), this natural element is personified as a male lover and given a name, "The Wanderer", because he tries to woo the subject with his breathings and murmurs: " 'O come,' it sighed so sweetly / 'I'll win thee'gainst thy will'" (ll. 27-28). But, in spite of the attractions of the night and the sweet insistence of the wind, whose "kiss grew warmer still", Emily shows an unprecedented resistance to both in her final reply: "go gentle singer, / Thy wooing voice is kind / But do not think its music / has power to reach my mind" (ll. 17-20).³² In "Shall Earth no more inspire thee" (1841), it is not only the wind that addresses and tries to captivate her but the personification of Nature itself, "I know my mountain breezes / Enchant and soothe thee still" (ll. 9-10). But, in spite of the reference to Emily's pantheistic creed, this earthly entity seems to guess that the poet's previously exclusive idolatry of nature is being pondered and changed in favour of another power in her own mind.³³

In "My Comforter" (1844), Emily addresses a new entity in a particularly difficult moment of her life, a mental faculty that she describes as being "concealed within my soul" and that she compares to a "light" that "lies hid from men" (6-7). Six months later, in "To Imagination", she would pay a heartfelt tribute directly to that same creative faculty, which she addresses and characterises as a confiding and friendly voice:

When weary with the long day's care

³² Emily's refusal to follow the wind in this occasion is made in the name of her introspective isolation ("silent musing"), an obvious sign of the poet's development, in particular of the need to become more reflexive or philosophical.

³³ The poem which best represents Emily's pantheistic inclination is "I see around me tombstones grey", also written in 1841. It is here, in this direct address to and dialogue with Mother-Nature, that she expresses her famously controversial preference for the Earth and consequent rejection of Heaven: "We would not leave our native home / For *any* world beyond the Tomb / No – rather on thy kindly breast / Let us be laid in lasting rest / Or waken but to share with thee / A mutual immortality – " (ll. 41-46).

And earthly change from pain to pain
And lost and ready to despair
Thy kind voice calls me back again –
O my true friend, I am not lone
While thou canst speak with such a tone!
(ll. 1-6)

The wonderful world to which Emily is once again seductively called is described also as a profoundly intimate *locus* (“the world within”, “within our bosom’s bound”), which contrasts sharply with “The danger and guilt and darkness” of the outer real world (ll. 13-18). But, unexpectedly, the note of faith in the power of this Imagination is checked by the laconic statement “I trust not to thy phantom bliss” (ll. 31), as Emily realises the ephemeral and fictitious happiness conferred by it.

As if to confirm the interest that this new poetic subject had raised, Emily composes “Plead for me”; as the title suggests, it contains an appeal to her imagination (“Thy sweet tongue must plead for me”), entity that she addresses directly as a defending lawyer in the court of life (presided by a stern judge, Reason). She wants her “God of Visions” to “say/ Why” she “did cast the world away” and “gave” her “spirit to adore” that “ever present, phantom thing” (ll. 23-4). In trying to define the object of her new adoration, Emily uses a series of strongly paradoxical images (such as “My Darling Pain”) to stress her dependency and justify her unorthodox choice of creed:

And am I wrong, to worship where
Faith cannot doubt, nor Hope despair,
Since my own soul can grant my prayer?
(ll. 36-8)

Unlike Emily, who allows the discordant voices to flourish without restrictions, Anne Brontë intervenes by disputing or advising the polyphonic voices of her creations. Many of Anne’s poems, even the short ones, develop an inward dialogue or argument.³⁴ Often we hear two inner voices quietly and rationally discussing alternative views or courses of action. Sometimes there are more than two voices, and the movement of the poem consists in according to each its full space, then reaching a conclusion which takes all into account, but gives one greater prominence. In the personal poems at least, the sincerity of the voices is unquestioned, and the poet gives each sympathetic

³⁴ Edward Chitham has noted that Anne’s “[...] work continually develops into narrative and more especially into dialogue, so that she is the most intellectual and logical of the Brontës.” (“Introduction” to *The Poems of Anne Brontë*, 1979, p. 42).

expression. A large group consists of spiritual or emotional autobiography, in which the poet engages in introspective argument or soliloquy. In the fictional poems, the different contending voices (dramatic monologues) that can be heard, belong either to male or female characters, beings constrained by separation, war, imprisonment or family opposition. As in Emily, they are often used to dramatise the situation of the poet herself.

In “Verses by Lady Geralda” (1836), the frail flower that the speaker picks (“a primrose young and pale”) becomes an eloquent symbol of her own predictable fate, “To die and wither there” (ll. 54). Unable to understand the inevitable transformations within her that affect her perception of the world, Geralda realises that her “heart is changed alone” and that from her “childhood’s home, / ... all the joys are gone” (ll. 93-4). The poet expresses thus knowingly the conflicting voices within herself during the difficult process of growing into adulthood. But Geralda moves a step further into self-determination: as she no longer feels identified with the familiar world that surrounds her, she is suddenly determined to leave it: “I leave thee through the world to roam / In search of fair renown” (ll. 95-6).

In “A Voice from the Dungeon” (1837), the captive Marina, through whose voice the poet addresses us, bewails her fate, “I’m buried now; I’ve done with life” (l. 1); unable to find rest and oblivion in sleep, this prisoner is threatened at length by a strange form of madness, “I’m grown weary of my mind” (l. 10). The brief moments of happiness that she enjoys come to her in dreams of an illusory past among her beloved; but when she attempts to communicate with them, her human voice fails her completely: “I could not speak; / I uttered one long piercing shriek.” (ll. 47-8).

This symbolic incapacitation of the feminine expression occurs even more dramatically in “The Captive’s Dream” (1838), where the prisoner Alexandrina tries desperately to address a word of comfort to her absent beloved, if only in dreams. But in this attempt, she becomes suddenly paralysed and speechless:

[...] I had no power to speak,
I thought I was allowed to see him thus;
And yet I might not speak a single word;
[...]
I struggled wildly but it was in vain,
I could not rise from my dark dungeon floor,
And the dear name I vainly strove to speak,
Died in a voiceless whisper on my tongue,

Then I awoke, and lo it was a dream!
[...]
(ll. 9-22)

Only two days later, Anne would write another poem alluding to Alexandrina's captivity, "The North Wind". On hearing that element approach her cell, the prisoner immediately identifies the unmistakable 'voice' of the visitant, as it swiftly comes and goes (accompanying the rhythm and the alliterative rhyme of the poem) and a dialogue between the two ensues:

That wind is from the North, I know it well;
No other breeze could have so wild a swell.
Now deep and loud it thunders round my cell,
 Then faintly dies,
 And softly sighs,
And moans and murmurs mournfully.
I know its language; thus it speaks to me –
(ll. 1-7)

In its inspired speech, the personified wind evokes simultaneously the prisoner's homeland and childhood ("the cherished land / Of thy nativity"), but it fulfils the role of tragic chorus when it reminds Alexandrina of her doomed status: "The sweet world is not changed, but thou / Art pining in a dungeon now, / Where thou must ever be" (ll. 21-23).

If during the late thirties (1836-39) Anne collaborated fully in Emily's Gondal saga, from 1840 until 1845 she lived a double life: for most of the time fulfilling her duties as governess at Thorp Green and, when home for the holidays, joining Emily in the Gondal game to please her sister.³⁵ But when away from Emily and Haworth, Anne followed her own bent. Her work became progressively concerned with religion, with an inner discussion by which she would try to come to terms with her life in exile and with thoughts of unfulfilled love.³⁶ A good deal of her personal verse is, thus, usually aimed at reconciling the opposing demands, and contending voices, of reason and feeling.

³⁵ According to Edward Chitham, "There is a possibility that Emily and Anne discussed and reorganised their poetry at Christmas 1843; it was early in the new year that Emily began to recopy her poems, classified as Gondal or non-Gondal, about the same time Anne wrote one of the only two Gondal poems produced at Thorp Green." ("Introduction" to *The Poems of Anne Brontë*, p. 6).

³⁶ Anne's first extant poem dates from 1836 and it has a Gondal background. But at the end of the following year Anne suffered a religious crisis combined with a severe illness, and in 1840 began producing religious poetry. In the early part of 1840, the lively presence of the new curate, William Weightman, seems to have had some effect on Anne.

Evidence that Anne's religion was particularly dear to her is available from a considerable number of her poems. But her interest in the final destiny of the human soul is mostly confirmed in her dedication "To Cowper" (1842), in which she recalls her emotive childhood readings of the poet, with whom she had immediately identified and in whose work she had found the proof of identical Calvinist fears: "The language of my inmost heart / I traced in every line – / My sins, my sorrows, hopes and fears / Were there, and only mine." (ll. 5-8). She admires above all Cowper's capacity to endure the tormenting doubts of predestination that racked his spirit and is inclined to believe in the poet's final salvation, as in her own. But, in this dialogised address, Anne begins to question indirectly those fanatic supporters of the doctrine who dare to condemn such a pure soul as his:

Are these the symptoms of a heart
Of heavenly grace bereft,
From ever banished from its God,
To Satan's fury left?

Yet should thy darkest fears be true,
If Heaven be so severe
That such a soul as thine is lost,
O! how shall I appear?
(ll. 37-44)

In "A Word to the Calvinists" (1843), Anne uses the direct address of the second person plural to present a powerful argument in favour of the doctrine of universal salvation. Adapting the long iambic pentameter line to her purpose, she tries to deconstruct the basis of the Calvinist creed through a sarcastic rational justification that emphasises the incongruence of the feeling of Election versus the Christian idea of a just and merciful God:

You may rejoice to think yourselves secure,
You may be grateful for the gift divine,
That grace unsought which made your black hearts pure
And fits your earthborn souls in Heaven to shine.

But is it sweet to look around and view
Thousands excluded from that happiness,
Which they deserve at least as much as you,
Their faults not greater nor their virtues less?
[...]
And when you looking on your fellow men
Behold them doomed to endless misery,
How can you talk of joy and rapture then?
May God withhold such cruel joy from me!
(ll. 1-8, 21-4)

Around 1845, in the allegorical poem “Views of Life”, Anne would dramatise the conflicting or even antagonistic forces of life: the alternate speech of the voice of Experience and the voice of Hope before a third one, that of Youth. The dialogic form of the poem, imitating the classic style, is intended to illustrate one of the major human dilemmas through argumentation; if the first one is accused of being a “Stern Prophet”, the second one is treated as a “false light”. In the end, the poet seems to take her side with Hope because it “points beyond the sky” and “a brightness throws / O’er all our labours and our woes”. Moreover, in her appeal “let us not enhance our doom” and her determination “We’ll notice every lovely thing” (ll. 137-160), Anne seems to be responding critically to her sister Emily’s usual scepticism and pessimism.

This indirect correspondence with her sister would continue in “The Three Guides” (1847), a long composition of hybrid inspiration, in which the poet deals with the conflicting voices and philosophies of three spiritual guides, the spirits of Earth, Pride and Faith. The first represents or symbolises an insensitive and exacerbated realism (“unbelieving, deaf and blind”) which contrasts with the proud powers of ecstasy and dream of the second (“so far above their fellow men”), while the third leads ultimately to salvation (“Thou pole-star of my darkest hours”). The Spirit of Pride seems to exhibit many of the features usually attributed to Emily or her characters (“Bright as thou art, and bold, and strong”) and, therefore, may constitute a critique to her sister’s more unorthodox work, namely to “No coward soul is mine” (1846) and “The Philosopher” (1845), in whose intellectual superior spirit three divine entities are also permanently at war. In her choice of a rule of life, Anne believes that the Spirit of Faith, with whom she identifies (“Meek is thine eye and soft thy voice”), is the only one which will lead to salvation.³⁷

At the end of 1847, Anne would start her most ambitious poetic project, where she summarises the greatest issues of her life under the dialogic form of a revealing debate. “Self-Communion” is thus built in the form of a dialogue between two distinct voices – reason and feeling – each presenting their respective arguments and allowing the subject to explore or dramatise, through an introspective self-reflection, his past,

³⁷ In this poem of great allegorical reach, Anne is indirectly contributing to the contemporary debate around the opposition between the materialist and utilitarian doctrines and the more humanist and idealist visions of the world. If in this dramatisation she rejects the first as cold and sordid, she also seems to discard the latter as deifying of man (incarnated, perhaps, in a Byronic Romanticism).

present and future life. At the end, Reason seems to condemn the subject's weakness and lack of wisdom: "O weak of heart! Why thus deplore / That Truth will Fancy's dreams destroy?" (ll. 271-2). To Anne's request that she is shown a glimpse of heavenly bliss, stern Reason replies only with "Labour and love – and such shall be thy meed" (l. 334).

After leaving Thorp Green, in 1845, communion with Emily had been resumed, if only superficially. Below the surface, the sisters felt very different and in the intervening years each had developed her own personal philosophy and corresponding poetic voice. In "Self-Communion" (ll. 178-207), Anne records the history of her "early friendship", making clear how the "genial bliss that could not cloy" (l. 180) became clouded. First Anne realised that "My fondness was but half returned" (l. 187), then she found she had to "check or nurse apart"

Full many an impulse of the heart
And many a darling thought:
What my soul worshipped, sought, and prized,
Were slighted, questioned, or despised. ...
(ll. 191-4)

As she had implied before in the poem, her quest was for a Christian God. Emily's, plainly, was not. In 1846, Anne had made a last attempt to accommodate herself once more to the pagan Gondal story. But those who had been as 'like twins', now felt ideologically divided. If Emily saw the world in her imagination as a manifestation of Shelleyan pantheism and dissented from conventional creeds, Anne had found imaginative sublimation in religious fervour and universal salvation. Here is her final metaphorical account of the difference of opinion between the two sister poets:

And as my love the warmer glowed
The deeper would that anguish sink,
That this dark stream between us flowed,
Though both stood bending o'er its brink.
Until, at last, I learned to bear
A colder heart within my breast;
To share such thoughts as I could share
And calmly keep the rest.
I saw that they were Sundered now,
The trees that at the root were one:
They yet might mingle leaf and bough,
But still the stems must stand alone.
("Self-Communion", ll. 196-207)

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